Insights from the Frontline:

Understanding the Emotional Toll of Beneficiary Facing Roles in Charities

ACO Association of Charitable Organisations

Rightsteps

Foreword

Every day, thousands of people working across charities and non-profit organisations provide essential support to individuals facing personal challenges. Whether it's responding to crisis, offering practical guidance, managing complex cases, or providing support services, these roles are often emotionally demanding and can have a significant personal impact.

The Association of Charitable Organisation (ACO) is the membership body for charities that provide financial and wellbeing support to individuals. ACO provides a platform for organisations to share knowledge, strengthen services and deliver social impact.

Rightsteps are mental health specialists and part of Turning Point, one of the UK's leading social enterprises which has been providing health and social care services for more than 60 years. Rightsteps work with a range of benevolent and corporate organisations across the UK to create workplaces where colleagues feel valued, supported and able to reach their full potential. They do this by providing a range of evidenced mental health and wellbeing solutions tailored to each organisation's needs.

Together, ACO and Rightsteps recognised an important opportunity to better understand the experiences of those working in frontline, beneficiary-facing roles across the charitable sector. While considerable attention is rightly paid to supporting beneficiaries, there is a growing recognition that those providing support can themselves experience emotional strain and stress as a result of exposure to distressing or traumatic situations.

This report presents the findings of a survey exploring the emotional impact of beneficiary-facing work and the effectiveness of the support available to those carrying out these roles.

We hope these findings contribute to important sector-wide conversations around strengthening workplace wellbeing to ensure that those who help others receive the support they need.

About the Survey

The survey explored experiences of emotional impact, exposure to distressing or challenging interactions, wellbeing and mental health outcomes, access to workplace support, coping strategies, and job satisfaction. It sought to build a clearer picture of both the challenges and the factors that support wellbeing, resilience and job satisfaction in beneficiary-facing roles, while identifying opportunities for organisations to strengthen support for their workforce.

Methodology

Through 122 anonymous responses, the survey captured the experiences across a broad range of roles, including frontline practitioners, advisers, operational staff, managers and senior leaders. This broad participation suggests that the emotional impact of supporting beneficiaries can affect employees throughout an organisation.

A mixed-methods approach was used, combining quantitative scale-based questions with qualitative free-text responses. This enabled analysis of both the prevalence of particular experiences and deeper understanding of lived experiences.

These findings represent self-reported experiences and provides insight into patterns, risks and opportunities for charity and non-profit organisational learning across the sector.

Key Findings

The survey findings highlight the scale of the emotional impact of roles across charitable organisations and the importance of ensuring staff have access to effective support.

Exposure to emotionally challenging situations is common:

more than 80% of respondents experience challenging interactions with distressed individuals at least occasionally, 38% encounter them weekly, and 13% experience them **every day.**

16% report being **very or extremely** affected by the emotional demands of their role, 63% say they sometimes feel negatively emotionally impacted by their work, and only one respondent said they are never emotionally impacted.

The impact tends to extend beyond the workplace:

84% **have experienced at least one work-related wellbeing symptom**

The most common reported were trouble sleeping (45%), burnout or emotional exhaustion (43%), physical health issues (42%), anxiety (38%) and low mood or despression (20%). **16% often or always** carry work-related stress into their personal life.

Many have had to take time away from work:

18% have taken time away from work, or felt that they should have, due to the emotional impact of their role. 33% of those who took time away were absent **more than 11 days.**

Staff show strong personal resillience:

64% rate their overall job satisfaction **between eight and ten out of ten** and many respondents report strong confidence in managing their own emotional wellbeing and continue to find their work meaningful, rewarding and purposeful despite its challenges.

Support is often informal rather than organisational

The most common coping strategies include:

- Talking to colleagues, friends and family
- Walking, exercise and spending time outdoors
- Taking breaks and creating distance from work
- Hobbies, self-care and relaxation activities

However, a small but important minority report having few or no structured coping strategies in place.

There are often barriers to accessing support:

74% have not accessed organisational wellbeing support during the last 12 months and 11% are either unaware of any wellbeing support available or believe **no support is available within their organisation.**

Many staff reported that their biggest challenges are:

- Managing increasingly complex beneficiary needs
- Feeling unable to help everyone who needs support
- High workloads and administrative pressures
- Limited staffing and resources
- Balancing emotional demands with performance expectations
- Maintaining healthy boundaries between work and home life

Overall, the findings highlight a committed and resilient workforce, but one operating under sustained emotional pressure. This suggests a **clear opportunity for charities to strengthen organisation-wide, proactive approaches** to support.

Addressing the **questions we asked**

The survey looked at three key areas of interest when it comes to frontline workers, which enables us to get a full view of the emotional demands of beneficiary-facing roles, how these demands affect staff wellbeing, and the extent to which current support systems meet needs. Together, these areas help move beyond isolated data points to understand both lived experience and organisational impact.

Section 1: Your experience in the role

The first area explored the roles and responsibilities staff hold, as well as the frequency with which they encounter emotionally challenging interactions, particularly when supporting distressed or vulnerable individuals. The aim of this section was to understand whether emotional demand is confined to specific frontline roles, or more widely across organisations.

Section 2: Your emotional health and wellbeing

The second area focused on how this emotional demand affects individuals, exploring confidence in managing emotional wellbeing, frequency and severity of emotional impact, physical and mental health symptoms, and the extent to which work-related stress carries into personal life.

Section 3: Your support

The final area examined how staff cope with emotional demands and the effectiveness of organisational support. Questions within this section explored personal coping strategies, comfort in speaking to line managers, access to wellbeing services, and perceptions of how effective support is in practice.

Section 1: **Your experience in the role**

The findings show that emotionally demanding interactions are a routine part of working within the charity sector and are experienced across a wide range of roles and positions, highlighting the breadth of responsibility involved in supporting vulnerable individuals.

More than four in five respondents reported experiencing challenging interactions at least occassionally, demonstrating that exposure to emotional situations is a common feature of work across the sector.

While 13% of respondents encounter these interactions daily, the largest proportion experience them weekly (38%) or less than weekly (33%). **This suggests that emotional demands are not limited to specialist crisis-focused roles, but exist throughout many charitable workforces.**

80%+

experience challenging interactions at least occasionally.

Respondents described working with increasingly complex needs, including poor mental health, safeguarding concerns, financial hardship, bereavement and crisis situations.

Many highlighted the challenges of managing expectations when support available does not match the level of need presented.

Others spoke about the difficulty of **balancing meaningful client work with increasing administrative and organisational demands.**

One of the most consistent themes was the feeling of not being able to help everyone who needs support. Limited resources, rising demand and pressures within teams often leave colleagues **feeling frustrated, powerless or concerned** about the outcomes for those they support.

Alongside workload pressures and competing priorities, these factors contribute significantly to the emotional demands associated with working in beneficiary-facing role.

Section 2: **Your emotional health and wellbeing**

Responses suggest that feeling emotionally impacted is a near-universal experience among staff. While many respondents report feeling confident in their ability to manage their emotional wellbeing, the demands of the role continue to have a significant effect on both emotional and physical health.

Although emotional impact is most commonly reported as occurring “sometimes” (63%), **only one respondent** reported never feeling negatively impacted by their role.

This survey captured experiences from advisers, caseworkers, welfare staff, counsellors, grants teams, managers, senior leaders and CEOs, highlighting how widespread the emotional impact is.

4 in 5

staff describe the emotional impact they experience as only slighty or moderate. However, 16% report being **very or extremely affected.**

For many, the impact of the role extends beyond emotional responses alone, with **more than eight in ten (84%)** of respondents reporting that they experience at least one negative health and wellbeing symptom as a direct result of their role.

45%

of respondents reported trouble sleeping, making it the most reported symptom, closely followed by burnout or emotional exhaustion (43%), physical health issues (42%), anxiety (38%), and low mood or depression (20%).

Many respondents also described having difficulties leaving work behind at the end of the day. Over half (52%) reported sometimes carrying stress or emotional tension into their personal lives, while a further 16% said this happens **often or always.** Nearly one in five (18%) report having taken time away from work or feeling that they should have due to the emotional impact of supporting vulnerable individuals.

Despite this, job satisfaction largely remains high with 64% of respondents rating their job satisfaction between 8 and 10 out of 10. This suggests that while the work can takes a significant toll, many staff continue to find strong, meaningful purpose and fulfilment in the work they do.

Section 3: **Your support**

Support systems play a crucial role in helping staff to manage the emotional demands of their work, yet many continue to rely primarily on personal coping strategies and informal support networks rather than structured organisational services.

When asked about how they manage the emotional impact, respondents most frequently referred to talking with colleagues, friends, family members, and managers, alongside physical activity, spending time outdoors, hobbies and taking regular breaks. This indicates a workforce which is actively finding ways to manage emotional strain, but often through self-directed approaches.

The importance of supportive workplace connections is reflected in experiences of speaking to managers about wellbeing concerns. Just over half (52%) reported feeling very or completely comfortable discussing emotional or mental wellbeing with their line manager, and a further 26% felt moderately comfortable. However, one in five (21%) reported feeling only slightly comfortable or not comfortable at all, suggesting that levels of psychological safety and confidence in raising concerns vary significantly between organisations and teams.

Despite the high levels of emotional impact reported throughout the survey, uptake of formal wellbeing support was relatively low.

74%

had not accessed any organisational wellbeing or mental health support during the previous 12 months.

In addition, 11% either did not know what support was available or believed that no support existed within their organisation. These finding suggest there may be barriers relating to **awareness, accessibility, perceived value or confidence in available services.**

However, experiences of organisational support were largely mixed with 52% of respondents rating their organisations support as moderately or very effective, and a further 7% feeling that is was extremely effective.

Section 3: **Continued**

Qualitative responses reinforced this variation, with some staff describing supportive managers, strong team cultures and effective supervision, while others reported difficulties accessing support, concerns about confidentiality, inconsistency in provision or feeling that emotional strain was not fully recognised.

When asked what would help them feel more supported, respondents consistently highlighted practical and organisational changes alongside wellbeing interventions. Common themes included:

- Increased staffing and capacity
- Reduced workload pressures
- Regular supervision, opportunities for reflection and debriefing
- Stronger peer support networks
- Greater recognition from leaders of the realities of frontline work.

The findings suggest that staff view wellbeing not just as an individual responsibility, but as something that is strongly influenced by organisational culture, systems, resources and leadership.

In Summary

The findings suggest that emotional impact is an inherent and sustained part of frontline charity work, affecting the vast majority of staff regardless of role or seniority. While most employees demonstrate resilience and maintain relatively high job satisfaction, this is often achieved through personal coping strategies rather than consistent organisational support.

Emotional strain is typically experienced at manageable levels, but can be cumulative, widespread, and sometimes severe, with a meaningful minority experiencing burnout, prolonged absence, or significant distress.

The findings suggest a notable gap between the level of need experienced by staff and the extent to which formal support systems are perceived as accessible, engaging, and effective. When considered alongside workload pressures and variations in workplace culture, the findings invite reflection on how organisations can balance a focus on individual resilience with broader, systemic approaches to wellbeing.

Charities seeking to promote workforce wellbeing may wish to consider how organisation-wide, preventative approaches can complement existing support services by addressing the factors that contribute to stress and emotional strain. The next pages provides some key recomendations to consider in order to achieve this.

Key Recommendations

Embed wellbeing into everyday practice

Emotional wellbeing should be treated as a core component of service delivery rather than an additional benefit or standalone initiative.

- Integrate wellbeing discussions into regular supervision and one-to-one meetings.
- Create protected opportunities for staff to reflect on emotionally challenging work.
- Ensure wellbeing is considered during service planning, workforce development and operational decision-making.
- Regularly review staff wellbeing alongside other organisational performance indicators.

Strengthen line manager capability

Managers play a critical role in recognising emotional strain, creating psychological safety and supporting healthy working practices.

- Equip managers to recognise early signs of burnout, compassion fatigue and emotional exhaustion.
- Build confidence in having supportive wellbeing conversations.
- Ensure managers are given the time, resources and support needed to support others effectively.

Formalise peer support & reflective practice

The findings show that staff rely heavily on colleagues and informal support networks to manage emotional impact.

- Introduce regular peer support sessions and facilitated reflective practice groups.
- Create opportunities for teams to debrief following difficult cases or incidents.
- Encourage cross-team learning and shared reflection where appropriate.
- Ensure remote and lone workers have equal opportunities to access peer support.

Improve accessibility of support services

Support is only effective if staff know it exists, trust it and feel able to access it when needed.

- Regularly communicate available wellbeing and mental health support.
- Simplify referral and access routes for support services.
- Address concerns around confidentiality and stigma.
- Gather staff feedback on support provision to ensure services remain relevant and responsive.

Address workload & capacity pressures

Many respondents identified workload, demand and limited resources as key contributors to emotional strain.

- Review caseloads and workload expectations regularly.
- Invest in staffing capacity where possible to reduce pressure on existing teams.
- Streamline processes and reduce unnecessary administrative burden.
- Support teams to prioritise effectively during periods of high demand.

Foster a psychologically safe culture

Creating environments where staff feel comfortable speaking openly about wellbeing is essential.

- Encourage open, non-judgemental conversations about emotional impact.
- Role-model healthy working practices at all levels of the organisation.
- Recognise that emotional strain is an understandable response to emotionally demanding work.
- Promote a culture where seeking support is viewed as a strength rather than a weakness.

Support healthy boundaries & recovery

Helping staff recover from emotionally demanding work is critical to long-term wellbeing.

- Provide training in emotional boundaries, resilience and self-care.
- Encourage staff to take breaks, rest periods and annual leave.
- Consider introducing wellbeing days or dedicated recovery time following particularly challenging work.
- Create physical or virtual spaces where staff can decompress and reflect.

Target support for higher-risk groups

While emotional impact is widespread, some groups may face greater levels of exposure and risk.

- Identify staff who regularly work with highly complex or distressing situations.
- Develop clear processes to ensure that staff with high levels of exposure to distressing or complex work can access timely supervision, reflective support, and wellbeing resources.
- Monitor trends in absence, turnover and wellbeing indicators.
- Provide targeted interventions before challenges escalate into burnout or long-term absence.

Measure wellbeing proactively

Absence alone does not provide a complete picture of workforce wellbeing.

- Regularly seek staff feedback on emotional wellbeing and support needs.
- Monitor indicators such as stress levels, support uptake and job satisfaction.
- Use wellbeing data to inform organisational planning and workforce strategies.
- Review the effectiveness of support initiatives and adapt them based on staff experience.

Get
in touch

If you'd like to understand more around how **Rightsteps** or **ACO** can support your organisation, please get in touch:

info@rightsteps.co.uk
info@aco.uk.net

You can also find more information on our websites:
www.rightsteps.co.uk
www.aco.uk.net

Rightsteps

ACO Association of Charitable Organisations